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Volume 37 | Number 4

Article 6

4-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Myers, Mark (2010) "The Evolution of an Electronic Archives Program," *MAC Newsletter*: Vol. 37 : No. 4 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/macnewsletter/vol37/iss4/6>

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The Evolution of an Electronic Archives Program

By Mark Myers, Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives

In my last column (October 2009), I introduced myself by discussing how I became an electronic records archivist. I would like to continue the introduction by telling a little about the institution that I work for, the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives (KDLA), and by describing the evolution of its electronic records program. I do this not to hold up KDLA as the model for all electronic records programs or to say that everything we have done is perfect and correct. The electronic records program at KDLA is what it is, and it works well for the state of Kentucky. The point of this introduction is to lay the foundation for future discussions on electronic records issues and to provide readers an understanding of the particular perspective that I bring to electronic records management.

KDLA is the state library, the state archives, and the state records management authority. Kentucky is one of ten states in which these three functions are combined into one department. KDLA is directed by a commissioner who is the state librarian. It has four divisions: two on the library side, operating the state library and providing support for public libraries throughout the state; an administrative division, housing the commissioner's office and providing support for the department; and the Public Records Division (PRD), which houses the state archives and records management branches.

The PRD consists of five branches that offer records management services to state and local government agencies, preserve and provide access to the holdings of the state archives, and provide microfilm and digital imaging services to state and local agencies. The branch in which I work, Technology Analysis and Support (TAS), provides technology assistance to all of the other PRD branches through database development and management, records management services related to electronic records, and digital preservation via administration of the e-archives.

KDLA is one of the larger state archives with approximately 100,000 cubic feet of permanent records and two off-site records centers for state agencies with approximately 196,000 cubic feet of records. It began scheduling electronic records in the late 1970s. These "machine readable records," as they were called, consisted mainly of the output of data processing systems and mainframe computers. PRD staff had little background or knowledge

in dealing with these systems and relied on the information technology (IT) staff within state agencies to describe and categorize these records. In 1983, the State Archives and Records Commission, along with the state legislature, which had been concerned that many costly systems were sprouting up throughout state government, formed a joint Machine Readable Records Taskforce to find ways to reduce cost and duplication of systems. Realizing that more education was needed, KDLA secured a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to study machine-readable records. PRD staff used this grant to attend workshops, conferences, and training sessions to learn more about dealing with electronic records. Most notably, several staff attended the "Camp Pitt" Pittsburgh Project, looking at the functional requirements for evidence in record keeping, hosted by the University of Pittsburgh in the early 1990s.

Formed in 1984, the Kentucky Information Systems Commission (KISC) required state agencies to submit information resource plans (IRPs) in order to get funding for systems. The IRPs detailed the agency's plans for the system. The state archivist at the time, Lew Bellardo (later deputy archivist of the United States), had a seat on the commission. In the early 1990s, KISC was reorganized and renamed the Kentucky Information Resource Management Commission (KIRM), with the state librarian as the chair. Gradually, the quality of information in the IRPs began to decline. In the mid-1990s, yet another incarnation of the KISC/KIRM groups was launched with a renewed focus on enterprise-wide systems that would benefit multiple agencies. The state IT department was reorganized under a state chief information officer and adopted enterprise IT architecture and standards (hardware and software requirements and recommendations that state agencies had to follow) and a statewide centralization of IT assets. Another aspect of the new program was the heavy promotion of e-government services.

By the late 1990s, KDLA began to realize that the electronic records program had begun to lag behind the changes in technology and hired a consultant to evaluate the program and make changes that would enhance its role and ability to adapt to changing circumstances. I will describe the results of that process more fully in my next column.

KDLA's relationship with our state information technology department was a critical factor in the successes that we achieved. That relationship was cultivated over many years and continues today. It has been built on hard work, common interest, and a lot of luck and goodwill. The archival units of any organization must build and cultivate this kind of relationship as more and more records are created and stored in electronic format. Without it, the program will find that it is impossible to make real headway in building a solid, long-lasting electronic archives program.

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July issue: May 10

October issue: August 10

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